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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE HAJ DECISION ATTRACTS UNWANTED MEDIA
ATTENTION

11. (U) The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) will no longer apply for waivers from the Saudi Arabian government to allow Singaporean women under 45 years old to travel on the haj unaccompanied by a close male relative, the Straits Times newspaper reported on its front page on December 11. In explaining the decision, MUIS, a governmental statutory board, noted that the Saudi government had not granted any waivers for two years. The MUIS spokesman stated, "It is better to stop the appeals as it avoids complications with people being unable to go. We do not wish people to get disappointed at the last minute." The Straits Times article also noted the deadly stampede during the haj in January 2006 and the fact that women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. A wide variety of international news outlets, including Reuters, Newsweek and the International Herald Tribune and internet sites such as Salon.com, have picked up the story.

12. (SBU) Dr. Albakri Ahmad, a senior MUIS official, told us this was merely a procedural change and blamed the Straits Times reporter for the global attention. Clearly irritated by the media attention, he characterized the reporter as being "naughty" for mentioning the stampede and the driving restrictions since they had nothing to do with MUIS's decision. Concerned about a negative reaction by the Saudis, he wrote a letter to the editor, published on December 12, thanking the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Singapore for its "highest level of cooperation" in haj matters.

13. (U) Some Muslims in Singapore have privately criticized the MUIS decision. One young, female, Muslim Embassy contact (and recent International Visitor Program returnee) characterized MUIS's stance as "being complicit in the process of denying freedom and rights to others."

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